

In the Basement

by Maryann Palestino

The basement of the small house was the last floor to be cleared and swept before the auction. The basement door was kept locked, but the attorneys were kind enough to let June and Michael have the only key that would unlock the door to their Mother's special room. They carried flashlights down with them because their Mother didn't pay the last electric bill before she died. The steps sounded hollow, one by one, and when they reached the floor, they flipped the light switches on and off anyway. The furniture, mostly wicker, looked all gray and the air had the damp odor of rotting things.

Michael, with the help of his flashlight, retrieved a foot stool that he remembered was under the stairs and set it up under a high window. He propped the window open just enough to let a sliver of February daylight in with a touch of cool air. He stepped down and stood by his older sister. Before them were several rows of flower pots and baskets and other odd containers that were capable of holding dirt. Their eyes followed the rows of plants and flowers, now withered and stiff, down and back the length of the basement wall. June stepped back.

"An empty flower pot was like a grave to Mom, wasn't it?" June said without moving her eyes from what was in front of them.

"Yeah, I guess so. I really don't know. Let's get those boxes from upstairs and start cleaning out this place," he said, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing the back of his neck.

"I don't remember her having so many plants down here, do you?"

"No, I don't, June. But, it's been a while since I've been home."

"Me, too," she said. "Look, here's the one I sent her for her birthday last year. She even kept the card on it." There was just a hint of green on its dry stalks and June took the pot from the floor and brought it closer to the window.

"Dear Mother, Have a Wonderful Birthday, Love, June," she read to her brother. "I can't believe she had it so long."

"Are you ready to get those boxes now?" Michael asked. She put the pot back in its place and followed her brother up the stairs to the front porch where they had stacked the last of the boxes.

It was early evening by the time the two had made any noticeable progress in the basement. They uprooted all the dead plants and put them in an old grass bag they found. Later, Michael would toss them in the field out back where he used to toss grass clippings when he was a boy. All the pots were stacked neatly in the corner, except for one. June put aside her Mother's birthday plant to take home with her later that evening. The other containers—the butter dishes, the whipped cream bowls, the tupperware, and the milk cartons were all thrown in the garbage, dirt and all. The black and white checkered floor was swept clean, with little piles of dust, dirt, dried



Photo by Ivy Fleischer

leaves, and paper scraps left in the center and in the corners of the room. That job would be left until tomorrow, when it was lighter again.

June entered from the furnace room, one of three small rooms off the basement, with a lighted candle in each hand. She walked to her brother who was resting on the wicker couch, and handed him one. He set it on the card table beside him.

"I found these in the furnace room," she said. "I'd forgotten how soon it gets dark around here." Michael looked at his sister, noticing how the candle-light glowed like a halo around her thin face. He remembered his Mother's face looking that way when he was young, when she was young, too.

"We don't need to come back nearly as early tomorrow," she began. "All we need to do now is sweep the floor, take those old clothes out of the closets, and put covers on this furniture."

She even sounded like his Mother. "Don't forget to sweep your room," she would tell him. "Baseball practice is no reason for not hanging up your school clothes—and don't let that dog sleep on your bed!" His thoughts clung to those words that he heard so long ago, in the corner room two flights up, that was finally swept really clean for the very first time and the very last. Michael wondered what his Mother would think of him now, cleaning all day like he had been.

"Michael. Michael? Are you all right?"

"I'm tired June. What do you think would be wrong with me after tearing this place apart all day?!"

June moved the candle away from her face.

"I'm sorry, she said. "I'm just tired . . . I'm very tired."

"I know," she said and touched the side of her brother's cheek that faced up, away from the cushion. Michael closed his eyes. He was nine years old again on the living room couch with the chicken pox. He was home from school, watching a game show, and had closed his eyes, but was not asleep. His mother had come from the kitchen, smelling like Ajax, and touched his face to see if his fever had gone down, but he kept his eyes shut. The feel of her dry fingers on his swollen skin, the smell of lemon disinfectant, the clang of bells and flashing lights on the T.V. came back fresh in his memory.

"Michael, do you remember the time when you were sick and Mom let you sleep in the living room and watch T.V. instead of staying in your room and how jealous I was because she always made me stay in bed?" June smiled and looked at him.

He smiled, without opening his eyes. "Yes," he answered.

June sat back in the cushion beside her brother and sat forward again. She reached behind her, under the cushion, and pulled out a small round object. A baseball.

"Hey, Michael, do you remember this?" she held the object in front of him. He opened his eyes. It was his old Little League baseball.

"Oh, my God, I haven't seen that for twenty years. Where'd you find that?" He sat up beside her.

"Under this cushion." She handed him the ball.

"You know how this got here? This has been here for years. I hid it under this cushion at my eleventh birthday party when Mom told us we couldn't play baseball in the basement. Wow." He squinted at the ball. This was the ball that his teammates all signed at their last game of the season. And he thought he had lost it all those years.

"Is that the birthday party that John Miley threw up on your train set?"

"No, I think one of our cousins did that at one of our Christmas parties. But I remember that it was in the basement because Mom said that "a living room was no place for a train set."

Michael held his index finger in the air like his Mother used to and snapped his fingers that way she did as a sign to stop misbehaving in front of company.

June laughed. "I remember my birthday parties in this old basement. Mom let me wrap pink and yellow crepe paper around the railings and hang balloons over by the bar. This place seems so much smaller now, don't you think?"

"I always thought your parties were boring. You played the same pin the tail on the donkey, musical chairs, and "wonder ball" games. And someone always went home crying."

"Well, we didn't appreciate you and your squirrely friends spying on us from the furnace room. Mom let you get away with the dumbest things." They laughed.

"I know," he said. "Remember Mom would never let us win any of the games at our own parties because we were supposed to save the prizes for our guests. I hated that."

"I can't believe that was all so long ago. This poor basement. Our poor Mother. We shouldn't have moved so far away after Daddy died," June whispered.

"Our Mother was more than capable of taking care of herself. She was a very self-sufficient woman. It's not like she's the only widow in the world."

"Or was the only widow in the world. No, I don't think she was. But she did tell me once, after Daddy had died, that she wished she had had more children. Can you make sense of that?"

"Why do you always ask me questions like that? Women are too hard to understand. She probably said that when she was going through the "change." Look, June, it's not my fault I had to move away. It was the only job I could find."

"She said she wished she could have had twins—a boy and a girl for each of us to play with . . ."

"June."

The candle light made Michael's face glow like fire.

"But she did say that she felt fortunate to have raised both a son and a daughter—one of each. . ."

"June! Stop It!"

His face wrinkled with rage and made him look older than his sister. He stood up, walking away from her, his arms close to his small body. He wished he was taller than his sister, instead of small like his Mother had been.

"Michael, what's the matter? Didn't you ever hear her say that before?"

He stood, silently, near the corner of the basement, in front of their old kiddie chalk board that now came up to his waist, and he looked at the shadows of the stacked flower pots on the floor below him.

"God, didn't she ever throw anything away?"

"Michael, she told me in the hospital that she —"

"Stop it, June. I don't care—I don't want to hear—"

"No, listen, Michael. She said that she wished she had given us more freedom—"because kids need freedom to become themselves"—that's what she told me. Even if it means going far away from your Mother. She

understood, Michael."

Michael stood motionless. It felt cold in the room. He walked over to where he had set up the foot stool, squeezing the baseball between his hands, and slammed shut the small window. He looked over at the plant June had set aside on the stairs across the basement. The plant looked so thin in the shadows, its only blossom, colorless and dry, hanging from the tallest stem like a broken neck. He drew a breath and turned to where his sister sat lifeless on the dusty couch, looking so much like his Mother that he wanted to cry.

"What should we do with all those pots," he said pointing to them, hoping his sister couldn't see his face.

"I'll take them," June whispered.

Michael grabbed an empty box, the only one he could see, and dragged it to the corner where the pots were stacked like little stone monuments. Even the cardboard box looked like gray stone. A weightless, gray stone. He placed the pots in, several at a time, careful that each was secure in the one before it.

When he had finished, he met his sister at the foot of the stairs, the box wide in his arms. June held a candle, its clear wax dripping in one hand, her Mother's birthday plant in the other and led her brother up the stairs. He followed her, feeling for each step. He was barely half the way up when his sister had reached the top. He heard her jiggle the keys and before his foot had reached the next step, he lost his balance, grabbed the railing to keep his body from tumbling downward, and watched the box, full of pots, thump, step by step, into the darkness of the basement, and crash. He ran down after the box, followed by his sister, and knelt beside the pieces of pottery, cracked and shattered. June stood beside him, her candle bright as a torch, and he looked up at her.

"God, oh God, do you think she will forgive me? Do you think she will? Do you? Do You?!" he cried.